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## Apple, Daydream, Memory

Rachael Peckham

My older sister, Sarah, is the mother of an eighteen-month old girl, a precocious curly-haired toddler who shows less interest in carving a pumpkin than she does lying down in the grass beneath an apple tree. *Claire was definitely showing signs of her Aunt Rachael this afternoon*, Sarah debriefed in an email last week. *She was in her own world.*

I remember my *own worlds*, my daydreams. They appeared on the way to school, to weekly piano lessons, church every Sunday. Always in the car, because we lived in southern Michigan, Amish country, landlocked by corn and twenty miles of back roads to the closest grocery store. I spent a lot of time dreaming out the window, looking at freshly tilled soil but seeing a dance floor, waxed to a perfect buttery sheen.

My mother enrolled me in ballet at five-years-old. I quit at age six because it interfered with Saturday morning cartoons—my biggest regret to this day, as I loved to dance when no one was looking (and even more so, when someone was). I remember Sarah at thirteen, with a boxy video camera as big as a suitcase propped on her shoulders, recording my impassioned moves to Eddie Rabbitt’s “I Love a Rainy Night.” *I love to hear the thunder/ Watch the lightning/ When it lights up the sky.* But more than the lyrics, I remember Sarah’s laughter at the mis-timed summer-saults, at the words I got all wrong, no matter how many times she played the song, wrenching the record player’s needle back and back and back again, until I’d collapse out of breath.

The record player long gone, we watch the VHS tape now—nearly extinct itself—happy to have this memory, this scene, forever locked in place for our amusement again and again. But, how peculiar, to have the memory of the daydream of dancing and the memory of dancing itself and, finally, the memory of pushing *play* and watching the dancing—what psychologist

Douwe Draaisma calls an “artificial memory,” this preservation of “image and sound”—a labyrinth of memories all dancing together.<sup>1</sup> And how peculiar, to have a *metaphor* for memory—a labyrinth—which Draaisma takes up in *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind*. He chronicles the way we’ve literally thought about memory throughout the ages, and how those metaphors themselves are *metamorphic*, with the advent of technology and “memory aides,” such as the tape recorder, video camera, computer. Perhaps Draaisma is right about the artificial memory; perhaps memory resists aiding, as the second it’s represented, its meaning changes.

So, too, my daydreams changed with the current events. Mary Lou Rhetton introduced the phenomenon of gymnastics to me and, with it, the feel of the beam’s taut skin, the smell of chalk on the high bar, the padding of feet across the mat. Sometimes a vault led to a disastrous landing that gained me sympathy and concern; other times, a euphoric climax that left visible goose bumps on my arms and legs, the dream manifest in the body’s response.

I didn’t want to be famous as much as prodigious. Certainly, someone would part the stalks and recognize the tiny genius overshadowed by all that corn and cattle. Certainly the entire town of Reading, Michigan would marvel at the child who entered the first grade at three years old—no *two*, already reading and how appropriate for the town’s name! *Here she was, right beneath our noses.*

But I didn’t read at two; not even at five, when I really did enter kindergarten. I quit ballet at six. I never stepped foot on a balance beam, and couldn’t read music for the first four or five years I took piano lessons, much to my teacher’s frustration. “You’ve got to find a new teacher,” Doris declared after the last note of a particularly strangled sonata. “Or else, learn how to read. I’ve taken you as far as I can.”

I made a decision that afternoon, crying quietly in Doris's foil wall-papered bathroom, to stop playing by ear. No one understood or appreciated this talent except my mother, a music teacher herself, a supporter of the imagined; of improvisation; of playing by ear. She knew all along I couldn't read the notes but subscribed to the belief that a child gifted with *an ear* might lose that ability at the cost of learning to read music. It wasn't that she trusted her ear more than her eyes; rather, in all her years of playing and teaching, she saw that almost anyone could learn to sight read but very few people could listen to a tune once and then play it back. I liked to imagine she challenged my piano teacher—once her teacher, too—on this point: *Now Doris, we both know gifted children are the hardest to teach.*

But, somehow, that message never surfaced over talk of community choir practice.

I did learn to read music, finally, in band class, quickly abandoning all pretense of the phenomenal ear at the risk of getting a *B* in Sight Reading. As it turns out, I was not so bad at reading notes. In fact, I was quite good, eating up everything Doris set down before me—sonatas, fugues, tarantellas, an occasional waltz. *Boy, that pep talk really worked*, I saw her thinking. We started to bond. We played duets. When I told her I wanted to be a poet or a professor of children's literature or maybe a columnist, Doris said I could *do it all*—just like her daughter, Michelle, the prodigious apple of her eye.

\* \* \*

I am thinking of Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I Am Not a Painter":

I am not a painter, I am a poet  
Why? I think I would rather be  
a painter, but I am not.

I am not a painter. I make a poor poet and even poorer pianist, though at certain points in my adolescent life I wanted desper-

ately to be all three *par excellence*. So I relied on imagination to remember a future I would never see. Only much later in my adult life, after reading O'Hara, did I realize the meaning in "Why I Am Not a Painter," or a poet, or a pianist. I am a personal essayist. A daydreamer by profession, taking up all things without *being* any of them at all.

Still, it's a strange thing to remember a daydream, to recall what I imagined could happen—and not what did happen. Could these remembrances of a wish be considered *memories*? Philosopher Avishai Margalit, who studies the memory of mood, might say so.<sup>3</sup> Or historian David Gross, who suggests that memory can recall more than experience and past events—but also feelings and desires; duty and identity; and something I'm particularly interested in, a "remembering forward" to an imagined destiny.<sup>4</sup>

That's not to say my daydreams destined me to become a painter or pianist—I'm hard-pressed to even remember a single minor scale—but perhaps those childhood imaginings forecasted my future as a writer, as someone whose imaginings and desires are inextricably linked to her memory. As someone who is desperate to make meaning out of memory—desperate to recover sense and mood and feeling, if not date, time and place, desperate to *play by ear* on the keyboard of her computer, the only instrument she plays now.

That's not true. I still play piano, but I can't play from memory anymore; instead, I play from memory every time I sit down and write creative nonfiction. If writing is a kind of music, then perhaps I learned how to play when we got our first computer circa 1986, an Apple II GS. The "GS" stands for Graphics and Sound, which my mother used to arrange songs for her elementary music programs.

"You type like you're playing Hanon."<sup>5</sup> To this day, she likes to lean over me as I work, marveling at fingers in flight, the steady clacking. When I was growing up, my parents kept the computer in their room—I don't know why. What I do recall is

the Apple's novelty. It was quite a sophisticated computer, unlike our first one, which came from Radio Shack and was used as a "test project" by Michigan Farm Bureau so that farmers like my dad could check the market daily. Sarah, always the technology guru, figured out how to make her name flash continuously across the screen, a blinking marquee in my parents' bedroom.

"Mom, do you remember the first Apple we ever had?"

She is chopping an onion at the kitchen counter. I want to imagine here that it's an apple—so convenient for this essay's project—but it's an onion. I can almost smell it on her fingers, as I could every time she zipped my coat up before school, every time she played piano and the scent of onion clung to the keyboard.

"Of course I remember. Your dad and sister drove all the way to Adrian to pick it up."

With that Apple "picking" I became the first of my friends to get a computer, and for years, all I had to do was drop the word in a context outside of fruit and a classmate was lured to my house for a play date. This was no easy feat. We lived in the sticks, the boonies, or as my teenage friends would later say, *B.F.E.* (which I'm horrified to translate). For any friend to ride an extra hour on the bus just to play on the Apple II GS communicated a serious desire.

Sometimes I think I enjoyed the long trek, the solitude, as much as I did the play date. Five years after the purchase of the Apple, Sarah would attend Adrian College on a basketball scholarship. We drove to her games every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, one hour each way, one hour to script my daydreams. Usually they starred *me* at 6'2", playing center for the Bulldogs. My mom would videotape from the stands, balancing the big box on her shoulder because Dad was too "keyed up" to do anything but twist the program into a tight tube every time I took the baseline. Those four years, I made my fair share of three-point plays, lay-ups with the fowl shot to tie the score. I

won the game time and again with a last-second three-pointer. One time, I even twisted an ankle on the way down from an intentional fowl, got up, and still managed to nail the free-throw with one second left.

And that is how I appropriated my sister's college basketball career.

One thing I could never do was spin the ball on my finger tip the way Sarah did constantly, her tongue clamped between her lips in concentration. She'd spin the ball until the tip of her finger burned and we'd yell *do it again, do it again* and she would, the same way I danced for her as she ripped the needle across the record and Eddie Rabbit began his song all over again; the same way Doris had me do those Hanon exercises, up and down the scales, over and over until my fingers burned a body memory. *Don't think, your fingers will remember.* The same way I am typing these sentences without looking down. My fingers know where the *r* is and the *e* and the *m-e-m-b-e-r*. And suddenly I'm playing by ear again, intuitively feeling my way along the keyboard toward the memory of a daydream but I am back to where I started; what does it mean to remember a daydream rooted in memory?

I ask my husband Joel, a poet, if he can make sense of it all, and he says something mystical in a typical poet fashion: "Daydreaming is really the language of languid desire. The withheld fruit dangled at the end of the outstretched arm." He runs his finger along my arm, and I roll my eyes. "We enjoy the daydream because it is not reality," his voice trails off in a yawn. "Just deliciously out of reach."

Reading his words makes me reach for the O'Hara poem again, yet another appropriation:

I am not a poet, I am an essayist  
Why? I think I would rather be  
a poet, but I am not.

Why can't I write *the withheld fruit dangled at the end of the outstretched arm*? Instead, I want to analyze it, turn it on its head, say wait a minute, what's "deliciously out of reach" here?

Perhaps the daydream isn't a reaching but a *meeting* of reality and desire, not deliciously unattainable but *defensively* out of unconscious reach so that what does become conscious is expressed, as Freud suggests, "in ideal terms."<sup>6</sup> The daydream's desire finds meaning in the remembrance of what I am *not*: poet, pianist, painter, gymnast, basketball star and ballerina. I remember wanting to be all of these things as a child. If Freud is right and repressed desire is disguised in the ideal terms of childhood memories, then perhaps my daydreams beg a closer reading of my memories.

\* \* \*

At four years old I am sitting on the living room floor in cereal. I have spilled the box of Cheerios and am picking up each O off the brown shag carpet, studying it briefly before popping it in my mouth. Sarah is baby-sitting. "Tell me a story, Rach." She has the video camera again.

I look up at the TV expecting to see myself staring back and instead see my profile. A confusing visual concept. If I look straight at my sister, my face stares back on the TV monitor. But I want to see my face, so I look up at the TV—and again, that damn profile.

"Rach, look at me. Tell me a story."

And just like that, Narcissus gives up on catching her own reflection and starts to narrate: *Well, you see, Jemmifer got sick. She frew up in the car and I said, "It's okay, Jemmifer."*

The story, as I watch it now on VHS, wanders for some time because the child-me pauses every few seconds to eat a Cheerio. The narrative concludes with carsick *Jemmifer* being sent to bed happily with a red popsicle—a treat I associate to this day with

an upset stomach, though it doesn't take a psychoanalyst to point out its phallic implications.

What occurs to me now about this home video, though, is that the story is couched half in truth, half in imagination. *Jemmifer* was the name I gave to my imaginary friend, but *I* was the girl who got sick in the car. The girl who didn't mind staying in bed if it meant she got a popsicle.

The *Jemmifer*-story, like any daydream, is constructed out of truth but literally fed by desire. I wanted a popsicle, not this bland O-shaped cereal. (Of course, we know how Freud would interpret this, too.) My point is this: If I couldn't imagine a story independent of reality, then is it really (so deliciously) out of reach to suggest that my childhood daydreams are what Freud calls *screen memories*, the meeting half-way of fantasy and memory?

*Screen memories* is a particularly apt term—almost a pun—for a discussion of a computer that entered the family scene and never really left, at least in our minds. At six years old, I am already aware of its service to us. My mother will use it to compose music. My father will use it to check the hog market. My older sister will finally test out some basic programming functions she learned at computer camp. She teaches me how to make my own greeting cards on the Apple using a software program called *Print Shop*. I am hooked. I love that I can make a card for any occasion—Christmas, birthdays, Valentine's Day—making editorial decisions about the graphics, font, color, and most importantly, the message, always in the form of a poem: *I cannot miss/ a kiss form you/ You must like blue/ Your hart is a part what is true.* And to illustrate my point, big apple-shaped hearts adorn the cover.

Who was the lucky recipient of this card? I ask Sarah if she knows, and she says she does. "There was one where you wrote, *I love you Sarah. You are the bist,*" she laughs. "It was in the shape



of a heart that you cut out. And another one,” she adds, “where you wrote that I was a good basketball player.”

Of course, I remember these love notes to my sister. If they weren’t in Print Shop form, the letters were scribbled on lined notebook paper, folded in tiny squares I stuck in her coat pockets and under her pillows. Was it not enough that I snuck peaks at her *real* love letters, the ones from boys she’d later date in high school and spoon with on the couch after our parents went to bed? Was it not enough that I daydreamed about her basketball career, stole clothes from her closet, tried on her bras? It seems I wanted to *be* Sarah—in addition to everything else.

Now my sister is a mother. And she made me an aunt, fulfilling at least one of my daydreams. “When I watch Claire I immediately think of you, Rach,” she writes. “I can hardly wait for her to have her own *Jemmifer* and hear the stories she’ll tell.”

A little daydreamer, a little story teller. I get a bit drunk on this thought, though the narcissism is not lost on me; I am still that child trying to catch her reflection in the TV monitor, still the subject of her own stories, except now I write essays. And mostly, I read them. David Lehman writes in *Poetry Speaks*—a poetry anthology that comes with a CD full of all the poems read aloud in the authors’ voices; a fitting project, I think—that Frank O’Hara “found a way to write about himself and his trials that make his wounded narcissism—‘the catastrophe of my personality,’ as he put it in a poem titled ‘Mayakovsky’—seem ‘beautiful’ and ‘interesting’ and ‘modern.’”<sup>7</sup> And I wonder, am I deconstructing my own daydreams, psychoanalyzing my own memories so that my “wounded narcissism” might seem more “interesting”? But you have to admit, the family romance here is a little interesting, no?

Well, then, let me add my first naked-dad-sighting to the mix.

Again, that Apple in my parents’ bedroom. I spend a lot of time there, crafting homemade cards for my sister, playing

Carmen San Diego, coloring seascapes with a software program that makes coloring outside the lines a moot point. No wonder it took a surprised parent, fresh out of the shower, to pry my eyes from the pretty pixels.

What comes next might very well be what Freud calls “the objectionable element” (i.e., the fantasy part of the memory), but I seem to recall my dad making quite a scene out of his embarrassing exposure, which didn’t seem so embarrassing as he danced around in his birthday suit, chanting an old fraternity song whose lyrics I am relieved I can’t recall. How well do I remember the hilarity of watching that flaccid piece of flesh moving to and fro as he hopped from foot to foot? Do I remember thinking it was funny, or is humor the guise, the screen dividing the repressed experience from its conscious version?

Even now, in examining the experience critically, I think it was genuinely funny. While my family members are modestly Midwestern and traditional in most of their attitudes (pre-marital sex is bad), when it comes to the body I was raised to embrace it (masturbation is good) with a certain amount of candor and humor. My mother still teases me about “Lulu,” the name I apparently gave my vagina when I was a toddler. I tease her back about the time she removed her slip from atop the organist’s bench and handed it to my baby brother in the middle of a hymn. (She had left his blanket at home.)

Still, I suppose it’s possible I’ve somehow traded in the real naked-dad-experience for an idealized one, one I can analyze in its Edenic symbolism, right down to the “apple” responsible for the sudden awareness of my dad’s penis. Either way, I can’t help but feel a slight shudder; after all, the driving force behind one of my earliest memories was a popsicle. And I danced until exhaustion while my sister video taped. And I wrote her love letters. And I enjoyed the smell of onion on my mom’s fingers. Collectively, it all sounds a little troubling.

But as for *trouble*, there wasn't much. I had a daydream-filled childhood, with parents who are still in love and who raised a symmetrical family of two girls/two boys (the pattern repeated on both sides of the family) on acres and acres of land where both my parents were among the area's last students to see the inside of a one-room school house. Not exactly the stuff of trauma. In fact, sometimes I wish for a little grit in the rear view mirror, the stuff of compelling memoirs.

Instead, I daydream, I imagine, I appropriate. This is not to say I *fictionalize*, however. There is a difference, I remind students, between wondering about the truth and wandering from the truth. I am conscious not to wander, but I do wonder about the wandering of memory from truth in screen memories, and of the wandering within the wonder of daydreams. Lost in the labyrinth again.

A labyrinth, unlike a maze, has more than one solution, more than one way out. That's why it's my metaphor of choice for memory (why does this sound like an advertisement for laundry detergent?). I realize it's not original to suggest that memory has a multiplicity of meaning in the way we think about memory and in how we express it; this is not the work of a genius but of someone who still finds herself daydreaming she is the pianist playing "Clair de Lune" in the background. Someone who is filled with the same curiosity and awe of a child approaching a wild kitten hiding beneath a barn. There is wonder, not just in the daydream but in the daydream's relation to desire, and of desire to memory.

\* \* \*

. . . My poem  
is finished and I haven't mentioned  
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call  
it ORANGES.

Frank O'Hara's poem, "Why I Am Not a Painter," is less a defense of why he is a poet as much as it is a wondering, a daydream about the visual arts and its ability to inspire the poet to write just as much as "mainstream literary influences," Lehman proposes. Perhaps my daydreams about ballet, piano, gymnastics, my sister's basketball career, have less to do with the repression and/or the desire to be these things, and more to do with the discovery of a muse. Of what moves the mind to play, dance, write. *There should be so much more, not of orange, of words...* O'Hara, you are right; there should be so much more here, not of apples but of *words* about memory and fantasy—the apples and oranges of our art, Dear poet.

So here are the words, for I'm seeing a stage out this car window, full of floodlight before an audience so dark you could dip your hand in it like a warm pool. It's good that it's dark; I won't be as nervous this way. I enter stage left, not to dance or tumble or play "Clair de Lune" but to read some words I will write, the only words that get to fill this space, this moment fixed and not fixed—the memory of the daydream of wanting to write, and who was it who said *we don't want to write; we want to have written?* This is why I dream of the reading and not the writing; this is why I don't dance but envision the production; don't practice but imagine the concert. It's so much *to experience without possession, to bask in its presence without eating of it.*<sup>8</sup> I can write anything, mean anything I want over and over again: the red popsicle, the basketball quivering on the fingertip, dancing Dad in the middle of the bedroom, juggling apples as he exits the garden. *Tell me a story.* I look at the monitor and this time, I see my reflection in the tilt and nod of every faceless audience member. Take a bow, the car is in the driveway, the curtain is dropping.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Douwe Draaisma, "Introduction," *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas About the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2000):2.

<sup>2</sup> Avishai Margalit, "Emotions Recollected," *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002): 109.

<sup>3</sup> David Gross, "Varieties of Memory," *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000): 16.

<sup>4</sup> Method books for piano designed to teach speed and accuracy in fingering.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories," *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> David Lehman, "David Lehman on Frank O'Hara," *Poetry Speaks* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001): 289.

<sup>7</sup> O'Hara, Frank. "Why I Am Not a Painter." *Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets from Tennyson to Plath* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2001): 289.